

Nurture or Nature

'I've just about had enough of this, I'm sorry Julian, it's over,' Belinda stated finally, after hurling a torrent of insults at him. Her cold eyes bored into him. He leant back against the bar, his elbows resting on the counter and reflected on the stupidity of having a carpet in a bar. It was smeared with beer stains and black spots where cigarettes had been stubbed out. And this in a four star hotel? Belinda stamped her feet, furious now by his lack of response. She turned on her heels and marched out of the bar swinging her long blonde hair behind her.

Julian was not really surprised, two weeks ago she'd come to stay with him in his Hong Kong hotel room, but their relationship wasn't working any more. They'd only had sex once and after that she'd started to complain about his lack of feeling, commitment and general interest in her. He'd heard it all before. Sharon had said the same thing, 'You're a great friend, nice to talk to, but cold in bed. Lisa'd said, 'You're charming and cute, but without sex appeal.' Marianne and Anna and all his other girlfriends had said it, he was a man to love as a friend, nothing more.

'You're my soul mate, we can play and laugh together,' Belinda had often said, 'But in bed you're hard to reach, just not present.' They'd worked on it though, they even talked about marriage, kids, settling down. He loved her to bits, shit, he was devoted to her! And now she had just walked out of his life. Didn't she have any idea how this felt?

A lump filled his throat, tears welled up into the corners of his eyes. He felt miserable. God, what a mess. He's 35 years old and not able to satisfy a single woman!

'Why did you let her walk out like that?' A soft voice said next to him. Julian looked up, into the round face of a young guy, with pronounced cheekbones and two slit dark eyes, framed by straight, silky blue-black hair. 'Sorry, I overheard the last bit of your conversation, the woman seemed a bit agitated?'

'She was, she just dumped me,' Julian said, swallowing hard and squeezing away the tears.

'Has that ever happen to you?'

'Only once.'

'You're lucky, it's happened to me too many times. I've developed a hide like a rhinoceros, my nerves have turned to wire, my emotions became plasticized and last but not least my brain's are fried.'

'But your humor and self-mockery is still intact!' The Chinese guy said smiling.

'No, call it self-pity.'

Well, how about I buy you a drink?'

'Yeah, why not. By the way, I'm Julian.'

'Yan, Yan Ma, pleased to meet you.'

'How come you speak such perfect English.'

'English mother,' Yan waved his right hand in the direction of another continent. 'So, what'll you drink.'

'Brandy and dry?' Julian said to the approaching barman.

'Make it two.' Yan said. 'Where's she gone now, anyway.'

'Who, Belinda? Don't know, probably packing her bags, calling a taxi to get her to the airport and running off to mummy in Melbourne. She's sort of homesick, always lived at home, she'll land up with some ordinary guy, marry him and pretend to be happy,' he said cynical.

'To me she seemed pretty sure of herself,' Yan said.

'Yes, you're right, she's a fantastic girl, maybe I'd better go up to my room to try and persuade her to stay. What would you do?' Yan said nothing, he sipped from his drink and studied at Julian. He possesses this kind of aloofness women find mysterious and attractive, he thought. In time they get fed up because they can't get through. Though the guy himself hasn't got a clue what his secret is, Yan reckoned.

Julian didn't move, he didn't believe in Belinda anymore, he felt sad, hurt and ready to get drunk. 'May be it has to do with my youth,' he said suddenly, staring in his glass.

'What happened,' Yan said gently. Julian gave him a quick glance, this guy seemed nice and interested, he was tempted to confide in him. Instead he said, 'Why should I bother you with that?' It sounded a bit rude, but Yan was not put off so easily and smiled. 'I'm curious, man. Who is that guy who's just been rejected by a pretty girl saying it has to do with his youth?'

'Lets have another drink,' Julian said.

'I think you need a friend right now, besides I'm a psychologist, listening is my profession,' Yan went on undeterred, 'so, tell me.'

'You live in Hong-Kong?' Julian asked instead.

'Yes, since my eighteenth. I was born in the U.K. and went to school there. Mum died when I was still a kid. Dad wanted to go back to his family in Northern China. He took me with him and my older brother stayed in England. But I couldn't get used to a sober farmer's life, didn't speak the local dialect, so when I was old enough I came to Hong Kong to study. It's better here, less Chinese, more English. I don't belong to either culture, you know. But enough about me, I want to hear about you,' Yan said smiling. Julian noticed wrinkles forming at the corners of his mouth breaking his smooth skin, as if someone threw a stone into still water. What an extremely nice and sensitive guy, he thought.

'Tell me Julian, what brings you to Hong Kong?'

'My job of course. I'm a project manager for an architectural firm. We're building a shopping mall and some huge apartment buildings, here.'

'You like it?'

'It's interesting. I wouldn't want to live here, though. I think now Belinda's gone I'll ask for a transfer.'

'So, what happened in your youth?'

Julian smiled, 'you're not one bit tenacious, huh.' Yan smiled back, their eyes met for a second and they both registered sympathy for one another.

'It's nothing,' Julian said, 'I didn't lose a mother or anything. I've two fantastic parents and we're very close.'

'So? Everyone has baggage, just don't let it weigh too heavily on the life you live now.'

'Wise words. However, something has been bothering me a lot, since I was fifteen. My parents got divorced then, but not because they hated each other, not at all. At first they gave me a lot of crap, like dad wanted more space and wanted to live in the country and mum loved London and wanted to stay there. Dad even said, 'it's because I love mum so much I wouldn't want to hurt her.' It didn't make any sense to me and I got upset because

they didn't seem to want to tell me the real reason for divorcing. They are still good friends; they travel together, spend weekends together and even came to visit me here in Hong Kong some weeks ago. But I know there is something they're not telling me. They don't trust me and that bothers me, they're just won't be straight.'

Yan nodded saying, 'God, the damage parents cause without knowing it.'

Julian went on, 'You know, because they don't take me seriously, I don't take myself seriously. I'm convinced that any relationship I have will fail. Maybe that's why I don't commit in the first place.'

'Why do you think it is that your parents don't tell you the real reason they split up?' Yan asked.

'Don't know.' Yan touched his shoulder, leaving his hand there, he said, 'Do parents have to share everything with their children? Aren't they allowed to have their secrets?'

'Sure, but it hurts, you know, I feel left out,' Julian whispered. He felt the warmth from Yan's hand spreading through him and tingling at the nape of his neck. Suddenly he felt tongue-tied and took a big gulp from his glass, feeling almost shy.

After a while Yan said, 'Let's have dinner together and continue talking, I want to hear about England.'

'Good idea, but only if you take me to a real Chinese restaurant!'

'You're on, I know just the place.' They walked out of the bar chatting like two old chums.

'You studied architecture at Oxford?' Yan asked.

'Yep, I did, d'you know people there?'

'My brother David was there, he studied art, he's even teaching it now.'

'You must mean David Ma? I know him, everybody knows him, we rowed together on the Thames.'

'I knew it, it's such a small world, isn't it.' Yan grabbed Julian's shoulders and shook him. His enthusiasm moved Julian, normally he wasn't so keen on other men touching him, but Yan's excitement felt refreshing and just so normal.

They ate with chopsticks and Yan told him all about authentic Chinese food; its history and Chinese eating habits. Julian hung on every word, they laughed and joked. Julian didn't

mind Yan's touching him anymore and was fascinated by the change in his expression when he smiled. The way his skin wrinkled, when his lips parted and revealed two rows of very white and regular teeth. When he looked serious again it was as if a curtain had closed.

Julian drank a little bit too much and Yan had to support him back to his hotel. He took him to his room and guided Julian towards his bed. As he helped him undress, he gave him a soft neck massage. He pulled the duvet over him and sat on the edge of the bed watching Julian as he fell asleep. Stubbles had appeared on his face, his long dark eyelashes rested on his cheeks and his very pronounced adam's apple was moving slightly. Yan touched gently a scar on the side of his nose, it had intrigued him all evening. He found Julian extremely attractive, he had a nice combination of machismo and sweetness. He couldn't believe Julian had no idea of his sexual proclivity, was he really so naive? He kissed him on the lips and left, but before he'd reached the door, Julian said, 'Yan, wait. I'm not drunk, if I was drunk I wouldn't know what just happened, come here.'

'No, just think things over, I'll come back tomorrow.' But Julian tapped on the bed next to his and said, 'stay here, please.'

'But Belinda slept there.'

'Don't be so sensitive, we haven't done anything for weeks, I just couldn't. She said I was no good at sex, I told you.' Yan came back to the bed, he slipped under the duvet next to Julian with his clothes on. He desperately wanted to stay but felt shy and lay stiffly on his back next to Julian like an old granny. Julian, loosened by the drink said, 'something has come loose from the back of my mind.'

Then they hugged clumsily keeping the space between their bodies. Julian pulled Yan closer but was bothered by his prickly jumper on his bare skin. As their mouths touched, Julian laughed, 'hey you hairy animal, take off your clothes.' As soon as Yan was naked too they started to play like two young monkeys, laughing and shrieking. But Yan was too earnest, his touches were too ardent and passionate. He'd snared Julian and now he wanted to show him what he felt for him.

Some hours later they dozed off, but before long Julian woke up and turned on his back, staring at the ceiling, suddenly he was wide awake and his head crystal clear. The

lovmaking he'd just experienced with Yan had been something else. He'd never experienced anything like it with any of his girlfriends. He couldn't believe it had never occurred to him before. He'd never been much of a man with male friends, he'd always been surrounded by girls, they'd swarmed around him like seagulls behind a fishing boat. How could he have known? And then the penny dropped. Isn't this what happened to dad? He's the kind of man women like. Women always flirted with him, shared their problems with him, but he never became sexually with them, at least he'd never seen it. He just wasn't the type of guy to have sex with a woman. Suddenly, Julian saw the relationship of his parents in a new light, poor mum.

Then he remembered something else. He'd been a boy of fourteen and always hung out with his two bosom pals Len and Paul, dad loved to take them on small outings, like camping or sailing. On a hot summer day they'd gone sailing and Julian had seen a certain look in dad's eyes, which he'd never forgotten. They'd forgotten their bathing suits, so they'd dived into the water, naked, tossing a ball to one another. Dad had sat on the boat watching them. When they came out of the water, glistening wet, he'd had that strange look in his eyes which Julian hadn't understand then.

He wondered now if dad had ever had a boyfriend, maybe he had, he hoped so. Of course mum and dad had never told him their secret. It was none of his business, Yan was absolutely right there. But if only he had known. God, how naive he'd been. But then of course he'd never have met Yan. He turned on his side and watched him. Tenderly stroked his hairless, incredibly soft breast. He looked down at his own hairy chest, which women had drooled over, 'it's so masculine', they'd exclaimed. He sniffed Yan's neck, behind his ear and nibbled in his earlobe. He didn't smell that familiar sweetness of female perfume, instead he breathed a spicy mixture of sandalwood soap and sage. It overwhelmed and excited him and he felt suddenly extremely relieved.